

## FENELON AND VOLTAIRE.

FEW modern critics will refuse to Voltaire the title of champion historical liar of the world. He has had hundreds of competitors, and perhaps scores of them have surpassed him in barefacedly gratuitous assertion; but for a "thumping" lie, so well concocted, so attractively dressed, as to be greedily swallowed and easily digested by even the few fastidious among the mob who yearn for pungent historical titbits, the "Sage of Ferney" need fear no rival. Nearly all of his lies were exposed during his life-time or soon after;\* but so true is his own cynical remark as to the sticking qualities of plentifully-thrown mud, that even in our day many of his inventions are unwittingly credited by thousands who know little or nothing about Voltaire himself; for, almost without exception, writers of the heterodox and freethinking schools have transmitted his fictions from generation to generation as universally admitted—nay, indisputable—facts.

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\* Prominent among the vindicators of truth were Nonotte, in "Les Erreurs de Voltaire," 1762; Foncemagne, in his "Lettre sur le Testament Politique du Card. de Richelieu," 1750; the *Dictionnaire Historique, Littéraire, et Critique*," by the Abbé Barral and the Oratorians Guibaud and Valla, 1758; and Chaudon, in his "Les Grands Hommes Vengés," 1769.

“The Age of Louis XIV.” is, among all the works of Voltaire, probably the most prolific of falsehood; scarcely one of the truly great personages of that period is not covered with the cynic’s venomous slime. One is not thunderstruck when he reads the worse than insinuations as to the sincerity of Turenne’s conversion to Catholicism; but one is dazed when he beholds Fénelon, the dove of simplicity, presented to a hitherto venerating world as a probable hypocrite, a freethinker, and a philosopher. Such is the guise in which we are invited to regard the angelic Archbishop of Cambria, when his defamer tells us that Ramsay, a pupil of our prelate, wrote to him (Voltaire) that “if Fénelon had been born in a free country, he would have displayed his whole genius, and given a full career to his own principles, never known” (*sic.*)\*

Ramsay had been intimate with Fénelon, and when, despite the efforts of the best theologians of that communion, he had become convinced of the baselessness of Anglicanism, in which system he had been bred, he was saved by his friend from the shoals of incredulity, and drawn into the haven of Catholicity (1709). Such being the case, is it likely that Ramsay would have proclaimed his religious mentor as a mere time-server, a devotee of policy, a man ready to abandon his convictions for petty interest? Ramsay could not refute Voltaire’s asser-

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\* In Preface, Voltaire himself quotes Ramsay’s alleged original English.

tion; for he had died in 1743, and the allegation was not made until 1752. It is the opinion of Chaudon that if Ramsay ever wrote the adduced letter, the quoted passage alluded, not to Fénelon's religious principles, but to those "of the author of '*Telema-chus*' on the authority of kings." At any rate, Ramsay's *Life of Fénelon*\* shows that, to use the words of Sainte-Beuve, Mgr. de Cambray "was not of the ordination of d'Alembert and Voltaire."† Barthélemy, the latest author, we believe, to touch on this particular audacity of Voltaire, draws extensively on the work of Chaudon, who himself appeals to Ramsay's acknowledged judgment on Fénelon, as portrayed in his detailed account of his own argumentation with that prelate. We submit to the reader's attention a few passages of this interesting conversation, which certainly indicates none of those principles which Voltaire would attribute to Fénelon.

Having detailed certain objections concerning the Natural Law and toleration which he had adduced to the Archbishop, Ramsay gives the prelate's reply: "If you would persist in your philosophical independence, and if you would tolerate in some sort all kinds of sects, you must necessarily regard Christianity as an imposture; for there is no medium between Deism and Catholicism." As this seemed a paradox to Ramsay, the Archbishop explained: "In

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\* "*Histoire de la Vie et des Ouvrages de Messire F. de S. Fénelon.*" La Haye, 1723.

† "*Causeries du Lundi*" (1 Avril, 1850).

renouncing all supernatural and revealed law, you must limit yourself to Natural Religion, founded on the idea of God; but if you admit a revelation, you must recognize some supreme authority ever prompt and able to interpret it. Without such established visible authority, the Christian Church would be like a republic having wise laws, but no magistrates to enforce them. What a source of confusion! Each citizen, a copy of the law in hand, disputing its meaning! . . . Has not our Sovereign Legislator provided better than this for the peace of His republic and the preservation of His law? Again, if there is no infallible authority to say to all, 'Behold the real meaning of Holy Writ,' how are the ignorant peasant and the untutored artisan to decide where even the most learned can not agree? In giving a written law, God would have ignored the needs of the immense majority of mankind, had He not also furnished an interpreter to spare them a task the performance of which would be impossible. You must reject the Bible as a fiction, or submit to the Church."

Ramsay impetuously rejoined: "Monseigneur, you want me to recognize an earthly tribunal as infallible? I have gone through most of the sects, and permit me to say, with all due respect, that the priests of all religions are frequently more corrupt and more ignorant than other men." Fénelon sweetly replied: "If we do not rise above what is human in the most numerous assemblies of the

Church, we shall find there only what will revolt us and nourish our incredulity; we shall see only passions, prejudices, human imbecility, political scheming, cabals. But we must the more admire the divine omnipotence and wisdom, since they accomplish their designs by means which appear apt only to frustrate those designs." Ramsay yielded to the necessity of a living interpreter for a revealed law, but still clung to his idea of Natural Religion, and asserted that one need only to enter into one's self to feel the truth of that religion. Fénelon inquired: "And how many men are capable of so entering into themselves as to consult pure reason? Granted that some, here and there, may enter on this purely intellectual road, the rank and file can not, and they need external aid." But hearken to the prelate's *résumé* of the fall of man and the economy of the Redemption:

"Our first parents having abused their liberty in a paradise of immortality and pleasure, God changed their probationary state for a mortal one—one of mixed good and evil,—in order that an experience of the nothingness of creatures might prompt us to constantly yearn for a better life. From that time all men were born with an inclination to evil. . . . We are born sick, but a cure is ever ready at hand. The light which enlightens every one who comes into the world is never wanting to any individual. Sovereign Wisdom has spoken differently, according to time and place; to some by the supernatural

law and by the miracles of the Prophets, and to others by the natural law and the wonders of creation. Every person is judged by the law he knows, and not by that he ignores. At length God himself assumed flesh like our own, that He might satisfy for sin, and to furnish us an example of the worship due Him. God can not pardon a criminal without also manifesting His horror for crime; that manifestation He owes to justice, and it can be given only by Jesus Christ. . . . The religion of this Eternal Pontiff consists of charity alone; the Sacraments, the priesthood, and ceremonies, are only aids to our weakness,—only sensible signs to nourish in ourselves and others the knowledge and love of our common Father; in fine, they are means necessary to keep us in order, in unity, and in obedience. One day these means will cease, the figures will vanish, the true temple will be opened; our bodies will arise glorious, and God will communicate eternally with His creatures. Behold the general plan of Providence; behold, so to say, the *philosophy of the Bible*. Suppose that its truth could not be demonstrated. Would you not wish it to be true?"

In three different places\* Voltaire descants upon the scepticism of Fénelon, as manifested by certain

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\* In the "Siècle de Louis XIV.," in 1752; in the "Examen du Tableau Historique," in 1763; and in a letter to Formey, perpetual secretary of the Academy of Berlin, in 1752.

lines\* written by him, says the “Sage,” toward the end of his life. Here the prelate declares that he has “arrived at old age, and foresees nothing;” therefore, concludes Voltaire, he was a sceptic. Now, it is by no means certain that these verses were composed by the Archbishop of Cambrai, although Voltaire “swears before God,” in letters to Formey and to Courtivron, that the prelate’s nephew, the Marquis de Fénelon, sang them as his uncle’s production. The Marquis could not deny this; for he had been killed at the battle of Rocoux in 1746, and the assertion was made in 1752 and 1755. Voltaire himself admits that the verses are not to be found in the published editions of Fénelon’s works, because, he says, it was not deemed desirable that the Jansenists should have an opportunity to accuse their great adversary of scepticism; but he does not indicate the libraries where may be found any of the suppressed fifty copies of “*Telemaque*” which, as he insists, do contain them. But since Voltaire adduces the authority of the Marquis de Fénelon, let us, with Barthélemy, quote another nephew of the Archbishop, the pious Abbé de Fénelon, the intimate companion of a great part of his life.

The Abbé seems to admit his uncle’s composition of the verses, but interprets them in a way that would

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\* Jeune, j’étais trop sage  
Et voulais trop savoir;  
Je ne veux en partage  
Que badinage  
Et touche au dernier âge  
Sans rien prévoir.

not please Voltaire. "An historian, a *bel esprit*, but not very accurate, has made it to appear that Fénelon died like a 'philosopher,' yielding blindly to destiny, with neither fear nor hope. He quotes in proof certain verses which he presents Monseigneur de Cambrai as repeating during his last illness; but he takes good care not to observe that these verses are part of a canticle by M. de Fénelon, treating of the simplicity of a holy and divine childlikeness, which ignores human prudence and all inquietude for the future, in order to abandon itself, without any useless and often harmless surmises, to a trust in the mercy of God and in the merits of Jesus Christ."\* And Lépau,† finding fault with Voltaire as a falsifier of other men's literary productions, adduces these verses as an instance; showing that in this very poem, Fénelon, if its author, gave good proof of being actuated by most Christian sentiments. Voltaire shamelessly omitted to notice the stanza preceding the proffered lines, and there it is proclaimed that "human prudence is vain, that ignorance is the writer's science, that Jesus and His simplicity are his all."‡ In fact, the very title of this poem is

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\* "La Vie de Fénelon, écrite par l'Abbé, son neveu," prefixed to the works, edit. 1787, vol. i, p. 749.

† See Lépau's "Vie Politique, Littéraire, et Morale, de Voltaire," 1817.

‡ Adieu, vaine prudence,  
Je ne te dois plus rien;  
Une heureuse ignorance  
Est ma science:  
Jésus et son enfance  
Est tout mon bien.



opposed to the "philosophy" of Voltaire: "A farewell to human wisdom in order to live like a child."

The reader is probably familiar with Fénelon's history, and therefore we shall spare him the particulars of the saintly prelate's *quasi*-exile from the court of the great monarch. That he experienced grief because of his separation from the Duke of Burgundy—whom he had so carefully formed for the throne, and who, had death not intervened, would have proved a more than ordinarily worthy successor of St. Louis,—no one can doubt; but his regrets were not, as Voltaire would regard them, founded on a chagrin at being debarred from domination over his quondam pupil, or on a hankering after the allurements of a court; but rather on pure affection, which naturally yearns for the society of the beloved objects, and for opportunity to benefit it. Yet, our cynic says: "In his philosophical and honorable retreat, Fénelon learned how difficult it is to detach one's self from a court. He always manifested an interest in the court, and a taste for it which betrays itself amid all his resignation."

This charge is baseless; in not a line of the prelate's correspondence can be found a single expression which would give even coloring to it. Ramsay says that Louis XIV., having overcome the prejudice against Fénelon with which he had been inspired, "thought seriously of recalling the Archbishop; he wished his aid in terminating an affair (Jansenism) which agitated the church of

his kingdom. The Archbishop of Cambrai saw matters shaping themselves for his return, but with sentiments very different from those an ordinary man would have felt. He cherished only a desire for retirement. Had he been compelled to return to the court, he would have appeared there only to manifest his views concerning the best way to give peace to the Church, and would have retired immediately on perceiving that union had been effected."

But listen to Fénelon in reply to those who, afflicted by the prospect of schism in France, would have called on his virtue, his sweetness, and his genius, to banish the spectre. Had he been animated by a desire to play a prominent part on the stage of affairs, he would scarcely have answered: "I admit that your propositions would be more readily entertained by one possessing a taste for affairs. But my opinion of myself is not sufficiently exalted to warrant me in supposing that I can restore peace to the Church. I wish not to assume the grand *rôle* which you design for me; it is the Cardinal de Noailles who can give peace to the Church. I know no secrets, but I dare to assert that he can effect union when he wishes to do so; the matter is entirely in his hands. I wish for him all the glory, all the merit before God and men; and I would die content if, from a distance, I could hear of his having perfected the great work."\*

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\* When the dying Fénelon had received Extreme Unction, he wrote to the royal confessor, saying: "I beg of his Majesty two

But there is one fact that eloquently shows how little rancor Fénelon's dismissal must have caused in his gentle breast. When named for the archiepiscopal see of Cambrai, he could have enjoyed, in accordance with a detestable and too prevalent custom of the time, the emoluments of his see, and could have performed his duties by substitute, continuing to reside nearly always at court. He accepted his promotion, much as he loved his royal pupils, only on condition that he might reside in his diocese at least nine months of the year.\*

Nor does the life led by Fénelon at Cambrai, as depicted by himself in a letter to one of his nephews—the Abbé de Beaumont,—indicate any discontent with his lot. His gentleness as a man, his watchfulness as a bishop, had plentiful scope in a district constantly harassed by contending armies, and all,—English, Germans, Hollanders,—rivalled his own diocesans in veneration for the saintly shepherd. His recreation, whenever duty allowed any, was a visit to the cabin of some peasant, where he would console and instruct, and often join in the simple feasts and meals of the poor. Well could he write in 1710: “I have no desire to change my situation. I never sought the court; I was forced to it. I resided there for ten years without concerning myself about it—not taking one step for my own interest, not ask-

favors, which regard neither myself nor mine. The first is that the King will give me a successor who is pious, and firm against Jansenism, now so prevalent in these parts.” (See Bausset, “*Histoire de Fénelon.*” 1817).

\* Bausset, *loc. cit.*, vol. i, p. 318.

ing one favor, intervening in no schemes, and restricting myself to conscientious replies when my opinion was asked. I have been dismissed, and it is my duty to fill my present position in peace. The best of the King's servants who know me are well acquainted with my principles as to honor, religion, the King, and my country; they know my profound gratitude for all the King's favors. Other persons may easily be more capable than I am; none can be more truly zealous."\*

\* *Ib.*, vol. iii, p. 40.—According to Voltaire, the object of Fénelon in writing his charming classic, "*Telemachus*," was to satirize his sovereign, benefactor, and then friend, Louis XIV. But when was "*Telemachus*," composed? If Fénelon's intention was to satirize his king, the work must have been produced when he was suffering from some real or fancied injury at the hands of Louis. Certainly he would not have risked the royal resentment when he was in full favor, and had everything to lose by such action. But Fénelon himself tells us that this work was written while he was in charge of the education of the king's grandson, the Duc de Bourgogne; and during the entire period of his tutorship the prelate was in the highest favor of his Majesty, as indeed the very nature of his office would indicate. Again, the testimony of Bossuet shows that Fénelon composed "*Telemachus*" in 1693 or '94, that is, when the two bishops were on terms of the most intimate confidence. Bossuet says that Fénelon communicated to him the first part of his MS., and it is scarcely to be supposed that he would have done so, had he wished to attack the king in any manner. At least this participation indicates that "*Telemachus*" was written before any coolness had arisen between the two prelates; that is, before the period (1699) when, and after which only, Fénelon could have felt any chagrin toward Louis XIV., and when he might have acted as a man of less noble spirit than his own would have naturally done, if opportunity permitted. Therefore Fénelon shall still remain for us the "dove of Cambray;" and the school of Voltaire shall not be gratified by seeing the hawk assigned as his emblem.